Interreligious Dialogue: the Christian Brothers and their Pedagogy of Love for the Oppressed

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Writing should be elegant, free from bombast and crisp. There should hardly be any repetition of big words. No matter whether it is a Ph.D. thesis or report about current affairs, ideally, even a child should be able to understand what is being said. Of course, it is not expected of a child to grasp Shakespeare's short lines, but a teenager must be able to understand that Shakespeare's' poetry is as great as his prose. This is the magic of good style. And it comes from practice.

Br. Maurice Baptist Finn cfc in 2025 with the author.

Br. Robert Cal Whiting cfc who happened to be my first spiritual mentor, taught me the basics of writing well. He insisted that I rewrite essays for the ICSE. When he corrected my essays and the compulsory practice-letters, they were all marked in red. He did not like the sound of my language. Aural beauty was missing. So, I had to rewrite essays often. When he was in Australia for painful but necessary operations, his stand in, the remarkable Br. Maurice Baptist Finn cfc took over. He was another very exacting monk. Between the two Brothers, I learnt the rudiments of writing. Here are what they taught me in point form:

1.) Be scrupulous to avoid tautology.
2.) Be clear and to the point.
3.) Use simple words, rather than bombast.

4.) Reread what you have written before submitting any writing anywhere.
5.) Be very cautious about using articles.

Both these Christian Brothers did not stop here. They ensured that the feel of the language got transmitted to me through songs and music. Both of them lent me Australian and Irish cassettes for listening at home. I literally grew up on Australian out back songs and Irish folk songs, hearing Aussie bushmen making do with 'matildas' and the iconic Molly Malone, among others, keeping me company as a kid.. Those days none had imagined of the internet in Calcutta. So, these two men's generosity with their time, shaped my inner life. Last year I reconnected with Bro. Finn cfc. The point here is not that they taught me good English skills; the point here is that they took time off, without boasting about their long and illustrious pasts to bring about the Kingdom of God in the here and now by reaching out to a child who was not of their own Faith. They personified the ideals of Vatican II through their gift of self --- both Brothers emptied themselves to help me grow. The debt I owe them cannot be returned in any way. As I had written in *The Herald*, freely they received; freely they gave.

Br. Joel Tavares cfc, Br. Leonard Lobo cfc with the author at Asansol in 2025

Br. Finn is very different from Br. Cal. Cal was a taciturn and shy man. Br. Finn is an outgoing man with a lot of 'joie de vivre'. His zest for life is infectious. I travelled to Goa to meet my teacher. Lo and behold! He was at the airport to receive me at his age. We caught up on old times and then some more. I was

surprised to find that he had built the Regina Mundi School at Goa from scratch. I had thought that Br. Finn was always a man stationed in Kolkata. This was surprising. He seems to have spent most of his time in Western India. He even studied counselling at Mumbai, St. Xavier's. I was unaware of that till I met him. Both of us went traipsing to old Churches and Panaji during my stay at Goa. Frankly, little has changed as far Br. Finn is concerned. I found in him a profoundly mystical man, trying always to connect to God. He had been with the scholar Raimundo Pannikar and Swami Abhishiktananda. The latter's life impressed Br. Finn quite a bit. Brother and I now share a bond which is a testament to true non-judgmental interreligious dialogue. A dialogue carried out during both our difficult and good times. I sometimes feel the urge to go slow in practices in Shakta Tantric, especially in the cremation ground at Tarapith; this Brother of Blessed Edmund Rice urges me to go on during my 'acedia'. I have much to tell the world about Br. Finn's interior world but respecting his wishes; those are for another day when the sun has long set. What I can say is that he wants to perfect himself more in his spiritual life though I feel he has reached a depth of spirituality which only very few Catholics and Hindus can ever think of reaching. His joviality and outgoing personality are red herrings. He is a determined monk who wants to be hidden and dead to the world. He does that by deflecting self-talk. Incidentally, neither Brother Finn, nor my first Gurudeva, Br. Robert Cal Whiting cfc, nor Brothers Joel Tavares and Leonard Lenny Lobo talk(ed) about themselves. They speak by their works for, from their fruits shall they be known. When I was a kid, I hardly knew about the backgrounds of Brs. Cal and Bap; or for that matter the only other Brothers around today who knew me as a kid --- Br. Joel Tavares and Br. Lenny Lobo. Last year at St. Patrick's, at Asansol, I met these two other monks.

Knowing fully well my Shakta orientation and the strange turns my life has taken; Bros. Lobo and Tavares invited me to their community. I not only felt welcomed, but I felt at home and at peace. This is interreligious dialogue in action. Seminars, webinars and learned tomes have their uses; but what greater signs of acceptance can there be than unconditional hospitality? And all four of the Brothers gifted me their time when I was a child. They did not ask for money; they did not care for my academic abilities or the lack of the same: all they cared about was that I got an education and experienced the Heart of Being a Brother. Brother Joel Tavares is a senior citizen now and yet at their refectory at Asansol in 2025, he did not allow me to wash my dishes. He gently took my dishes and washed them for me. This is Servant Leadership at its best and does more for interreligious dialogue than sombre meetings. Then Br. Tavares and I chatted quite late into the night. But for these Brothers, I would be nowhere today. It is because of them that I cared to study the Bible in some detail at the Pontifical Athenaeum much later in my life. It is because of them that I studied Formative Spirituality. And I reconnected with them last year after a gap of 31 years. It all started when I actually bumped into Br. Robert Cal Whiting. The huge Cal picked me up and thus started my journey into Catholicism. Yet the Catholicism that I encountered through and with these Brothers is catholic in the very best sense of their religion --- it is universal much in the same way that Hinduism is an eternal Dharma. They imparted the essence of their Faith to me through their lives and because of them I came to understand the value of their religion to our country's plural fabric. Their determined telling of the beads (The Holy Rosary) and their response to the orphaned and marginalized child had and continues to have a great impact on me. It is inconceivable to me that anyone,

but Brothers Whiting and Finn would take so much interest in educating a child who would be naturally ignored by men of other Religious congregations much better known than the Christian Brothers. In this way these Brothers are resisting the march of the cruel consumerist Pharaoh we meet in the Hebrew Scriptures. They, like their Lord, Jesus, the Christ, resist the march of this retreating world through a pedagogy of the oppressed and for the oppressed. If this is not lived liberation theology, then what is liberation theology?

Here I must clarify that I am far from Catholicism formally, though my best friends are all Catholic. I trust some of my Catholic friends the way I can never trust anyone else. And my journey into Catholicism was encouraged by my Tantric Guru, Sri Baba Sital Prasad Sett who has all the Siddhis of Shakta Tantra. Many mistakenly believe that Shakta Tantra is esoteric. It is not. All Hindu temples are built on Tantric principles. Every single Hindu ritual has a connection to Tantra. So, when repeatedly my Tantric Guru got to know about my interest in going to Catholic seminaries and communities, he whole-heartedly agreed. He is a man who has little exposure to Catholicism; yet he allows his 'chela' to hobnob with Catholics. This too is interreligious dialogue. And it all began because a Catholic monk, who is well-nigh forgotten today, took pity on a middle-class Bengali lad. Honestly, I doubt, as I did earlier here and in *The Herald*, whether other well-established Orders' members would even look at me in the early 1990s.

My Tantric Guru is a devout and orthodox Hindu and is against the slaughter of cows. He comes from Gorakhpur. Br. Finn is a very orthodox Irish Catholic monk. And Cal was a monk of his times. Today, he would be called a Traditional Catholic by many. So, the real dialogue is here between Catholicism and the most extreme forms of Hinduism --- Tantra and Aghora. These are very different worldviews but in their ascesis and insistence of love-in-action, the walls between our religions collapse. It is no longer Fulfilment theology in action. It is rather Love qua Shakti in action. The time of Baba Kinaram to dialogue with Catholicism has come. The time of the women practitioners of Tantra at Mayong in Assam, to whose lineage of Tantra I belong to, has come.

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